

Avi Benlolo is President and CEO at Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies – one of Canada's premier non-profit human rights organizations which offers specialized education programs to over 100,000 people every year and proudly boasts over 30,000 Canadian donors.

PRESIDENT AND CEO OF FSWC

Q&A AVI BENLOLO



SETTING SIGHTS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

INTERVIEWED BY ALAN SERRECCHIA

MR. BENLOLO IS A PUBLISHED WRITER and prominent speaker on behalf of Canadian human rights. Over the span of his twenty-three year career, Mr. Benlolo has raised over \$75 million for human rights advocacy and programs. His Canadian and global network is extensive, ranging from top Canadian business leaders to international thought and political figures Elie Wiesel, Salman Rushdie, Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Condoleezza Rice, Shimon Peres and Chris Hadfield. He regularly confers with Canadian political leaders at all levels, senior officials in law enforcement and education and leading journalists and thought-leaders.

In October 2017 Mr. Benlolo is being awarded an Honorary Doctorate Degree from the University of Haifa recognizing his outstanding leadership in the fight for human rights in Canada and beyond.

Q. When did you first feel the call to help others? What was your first concrete step towards answering this call to action? Do you think studying the Arts played a role in your eventual career path?

A. I have always had a strong identity embedded in social justice, based on my concern for the future of humanity. I recall even as a young school child, on several occasions, I became fearful of a nuclear Holocaust and internalized that anxiety. It was difficult for me to understand why human beings seem to have a primal need for violence. This became a central question for me as I entered university. All through my BA, Masters Degree and PhD (to be completed), I focused on social psychology and spent a great deal of time interviewing Holocaust survivors as well as survivors from Bosnia, Somalia and other war zones. After intense research, I decided that what the world needs is a counter balance to hate and intolerance. And that's what I set out to create.

Q. You first joined FSWC in 2000 and since then you have turned the organization into one of Canada's most well recognized proponents in the battle for human rights. Can you think of the turning point – any one moment or decision that helped usher in this turnaround which has FSWC boasting over 30,000 donors and over 100,000 annual attendees to the various programs offered?

A. The organization's success is the result of many supporters who helped FSWC establish itself in the early years. They understood – especially after 9/11 with the increase in terrorism and the resurgence of antisemitism and growing levels of intolerance, that a new voice was needed in Canada. We could no longer be silent. This recognition led to the development of advocacy campaigns, educational programs and nationwide relationships that continue to make a positive difference. I am especially proud of the success of many of the programs I developed with my team including the Tour for Humanity, Freedom Day, the Spirit of Hope Benefit, Speakers Idol and Tolerance and Diversity workshops.

Q. FSWC offers programs across the board for students to teachers, to law enforcement officers, to politicians – how important is it to custom craft your message to the many differing audiences out there?

A. Although each group is unique, our message is always the same – because human rights are universal – at least they should be. The information we use to educate a grade six classroom would differ from our education program for law enforcement. But both groups will leave with a sense of responsibility for humanity. Both groups will ask how they themselves as individuals can contribute to a better world.



“HOW WONDERFUL IT IS THAT NOBODY NEED WAIT A SINGLE MOMENT BEFORE STARTING TO IMPROVE THE WORLD.” - Anne Frank

Q. How do children respond to your programs and curriculum?

A. If you are ever in danger of losing hope in humanity, please come see one of our youth empowerment programs like Freedom Day or Speakers Idol. We empower youth by inspiring and encouraging them to do good in their schools and communities, and they in turn empower us to continue our work. We live in the greatest country in the world – one that radiates friendship, compassion, humanity and civility. The youth of today radiate those same values and have a positive outlook into the future. At the same time, we give them a sense of responsibility to preserve the values Canada espouses – freedom, democracy and human rights.

Q. The topics are difficult – what might you tell a parent that is concerned with introducing such difficult subjects to their children?

A. We have never had an issue from a concerned parent. We are very sensitive to how we introduce the subject matter and ensure younger children are only exposed to what they can understand. At the same time, we must teach the future generation about the past. As they say, “those who forget the past are destined to repeat it.”

Q. What is the “Tour 4 Humanity”? Where did the idea come from and how have people responded to it?

A. After realizing that many schools outside of the GTA and across Ontario could not come to our classroom in Toronto to attend one of our many human rights-based workshops, I came up with the idea of a mobile Tolerance Training Center. The story of the Tour for Humanity is amazing in and of itself. I literally went to an RV dealership and said, “I’ll take that one!” It cost \$246,000 for the RV and another \$800,000 to retrofit the RV into a wheelchair accessible classroom for 30 students, and to develop the curriculum. It was quite an investment, but we received a great deal of help from individual donors and the Trillium Foundation.

Q. What is the state of human rights in Vaughan and in Canada as a whole? Are there similar issues/challenges across the board or do the obstacles vary by area? Demographic?

A. According to the York Region hate crimes statistics for 2013-2014 the Jewish community was targeted more than all other religious groups. This said, Vaughan is a terrific city and community. We are fortunate to have Maurizio Bevilacqua as

our Mayor. I travelled with him to pay homage at the infamous Auschwitz Concentration Camp where over one million Jews were murdered. He was extraordinarily sympathetic. We also have in Vaughan a wonderful police service led by Chief Jolliffe and a team that has addressed hate crime in the city professionally. Additionally, the York Region Board of Education has given excellent attention to our educational programming in order to build a more compassionate city.

Q. What accomplishment are you most proud of – helping raise over \$75 million over your career, the overall success you have brought to FSWC, or being awarded the Queens Diamond Jubilee Medal for Service to Canada? Or does something else stick out to you above these things?

A. I feel fortunate to have been given this incredible opportunity to help make a difference. What really sticks in my mind are the countless people who have helped me and believed in me every step of the way. I have a team of mentors and friends whom I trust as advisors and as partners in our shared mission to make the world a better place. So, if I had to choose an accomplishment it would be that I have been able to create a large base of friends and supporters – both near and far – who surround me and the organization with love and compassion. I owe them a great deal of thanks.

Q. Simon Wiesenthal famously said that “Freedom is not a gift” – this quote has become a rallying cry for FSWC – what does it mean to you?

A. We take our freedom for granted. Freedom, like all social movements, is a social construct. Therefore, it can be changed or altered in an instant if we are not its protectors. For example, Adolph Hitler came to power while Germany was democratic. His Nazi party eventually murdered six million Jews and launched World War Two, which cost some 50 million lives. It is so important to understand that our freedoms must be cherished and protected; history has shown us how easily they can be taken away.



Q. This past July, Elie Wiesel passed away. What does his loss mean to the ongoing battle for human rights?

A. Every generation requires virtuous people who champion morality. They set parameters for the sacred and the profane. They speak out and take risks when others remain silent or oblivious – or even complicit in violence and abuse. Elie Wiesel was a moral compass for the world – very much like Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King Jr.

Q. What is the biggest threat to human rights moving forward? What role does the digital landscape we live in play in this threat?

A. One of the most significant threats to humanity today is terrorism. Our police services have managed to reduce the danger in Canada significantly – despite the fact there have been very serious incidents and threats. With respect to the digital revolution, we have found over 15 years of unparalleled growth of hate websites on line. This includes social networking where bullying and recruitment to terror organizations is pervasive. In fact, we attribute a growth of antisemitism globally to the pervasive nature of social networking. This is particularly true in university campuses where extreme groups and faculty are posting material that foments violence and hate. So while the Internet is advancing humanity, we have found throughout time that new technologies can also be used for evil.

Q. FSWC offers a course on Heroes – According to you, who is someone alive today that qualifies for this hero status and why?

A. Unfortunately, there is no one that tops my list. However, I know of many individuals who are contributing to their communities and to society. I always say that I get to work with the nicest people in the world – those giving to and participating in the promotion of a positive world. Therefore, we can all be Elie Wiesel, Martin Luther King Jr. or Mother Teresa. As Anne Frank noted while hiding in an attic from the Nazis, “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

Q. The Holocaust is not a Jewish Story, it is a Human Story – do you think most people understand this? Why is it so important for people to understand this?

A. I think most people still see the Holocaust as a Jewish story. It is indeed a Jewish story – because mostly Jews were murdered. But they were murdered by non Jews. So, whose story should it be? Indeed, it is humanity’s story to come to terms with how this incomprehensible tragedy could have happened, and it is the responsibility of each and every individual to ensure that hateful ideologies are countered with tolerance, compassion and a respect for diversity and human rights.